

CONSTRUCTIVISM

**CONSTRUCTIVISM,
the Russian
modern art
movement**

**described in short
text-quotes of
Jacob Bendien**



El Lissitzky: 'Beat the White with the Red Wedge', 1919

These art-quotes describe the style-characteristics, goals and meaning of Russian Constructivism as a typical Soviet art movement. They explain its theory and the main differences with Russian Suprematism. Famous Constructivist artists were El Lissitzky, Naum Gabo, Maholy Nagy and the brothers Pevsner.

The selected art quotes are taken from the Dutch art critic Jacob Bendien - his artbook "Trends in the Present Day Art of Painting", published by W.L & J. Brusse N.V. - Rotterdam, after his death; - editor: Fons Heijnsbroek / translation: Anne Porcelijn

CONSTRUCTIVISM, described in short art quotes

- The Constructivists were drawn into this movement especially because of their respect for machines and technical constructions. They saw in this a support for their ambition to find clarity and exactitude as opposed to subjectivity and individualism.

- The Constructivists' reality is that of the (natural) sciences built up from experience. Even if this reality has been shaped by man, it is no less objective and no less measurable than the reality of concrete natural objects....We practically have it in our power, like the machinist has power over his machine.

- Like New Objectivity, Constructivism is an attempt to liberate us from the subjectivity of our Expressionistic excesses.

- During the first modest steps towards this objectivity the Bolshevik Revolution erupted.

- Constructivism blossomed in this New Russia. The Bolshevik Revolution undoubtedly contributed to the development of the still unfulfilled Constructivism.

- Construction became their ideal in the most literal sense of the word.

- But the Constructivist also wants to control the art painting tools/materials. He started by defining the general basic elements of the art of painting.

- For him (the Constructivist artist, fh) painting was, in the first place, an objective study, a willful transition of the strictest simplification of art painting tools/materials, until, eventually nothing was left except the famous black square plane by Malevich.

- From there the art of painting was rebuilt. However, not to our subjective needs of expression, but to the most primitive possibilities that could be concluded from the black square plane, the so-called Constructivist or Suprematist elements.

- The Constructivist elements are for instance; two black planes next to and adjoining one another (a horizontal extension of the black square), a black square right above and adjoining another (a vertical extension of the black square), etc. After this, the circle, the triangle etc.

- Here was no longer any place for picturesque enchantment or a deepening of individual emotions; the middle-class atmosphere of life was finished. There was only place for constructions that could be objectively determined and valued and left nothing but clarity and survivability.

- There was a great deal to be learnt from the engineer. Firstly his accuracy, not with a grand gesture, but rather working with accurate calculations. This is what the Constructivist was searching for: objective, strict reality. Only... in art there is no way to calculate. At best they could only play at being 'engineer'.

- Although the machine was a beacon showing the way from the shadows of Expressionism. Constructivism had to be freed from the machine itself. It had to find its own constructions, its own materials and specifically its own statics and dynamics.

- For instance, copper can be the best material for part of a machine. For the Constructivist copper color is usually too warm and glowing. The statics and dynamics are also very different in art... ..An engineer understands the term balance in a totally different way than the artist / painter.

- One can suggest movement by showing how we see something moving. For instance a fast turning wheel, where we no longer see the separate spokes. However, when the Constructivists want to express movement, they do this directly through the art painting materials themselves. They suggest movement especially through the form and direction of the figures used.

- Also for other sensations they try, as a test, a direct art painting expression, for instance the sensation created by a sound dying away, or an electrical current or a magnetic attraction.

- They mainly interested themselves in powers that worked faultlessly, in tension and the strong lines of movement they observed in reality; and the sensations they gained from this they expressed in their constructions, more realistically, more sober and more businesslike than the reality itself, whilst we immediately feel that they are fiction.

- Lissitzky does exclaim 'Schafft Gegenstande' (Make objects / things (fh)). But by this he does not mean real things... ..But why 'Gegenstande'? He only wants to make pseudo things which express his urge for reality, for the earth. Things of the same hardness, immovability, earthbound in the same way as the daily life he sees around him.

- His aim is not to 'decorate' life but to organize it... ..He paints compositions that appear to be a plan for something, a calculated construction for practical life... ..However, does art next to the practice of life in this way not become a rather external and useless appendage?

- The Constructivists do not limit themselves exclusively to painting materials such as paint and chalk etc., but use all possible materials if they are suitable for accurate use, such as metal, glass, concrete etc... ..Above all these were much more suited to the creation of things even more realistic than reality itself.

- Not all Constructivists concentrate so strongly on reality. There are those for whom inner life plays an important part, such as the non-Russian Moholy Nagy, Kassak, Baumeister etc. Their art painting figures often have a more symbolic meaning... ..Sometimes without any direct connection to reality.

- Moholy Nagy's work is 'l'art pour l'art'. As opposed to Lissitzky who is demonstrative. He is ethical in as much as he propagates the Bolshevik morale of not dreaming but doing, of preferring a direct gesture rather than one of beauty.

- Lissitsky wants nothing to do with l'art pour l'art. Proun – as he called his work – is art in order to demonstrate the feel of reality. In 'Kunstismen' (the art magazine published by Lissitsky and Hans Arp) he defines Proun as the 'Umsteige-station von Malerei nach Architectur' (the Steptover from the art of painting to Architecture (fh)) .

- Moholy Nagy, on the contrary, does not muddle the various technical areas, but limits each technique to its own area. Later, when he applies himself more to photography and film (in America (fh)), he champions pure photography and film and opposes the imitation of the art of painting in these areas. There is no question of an 'Umsteigestation' from photography to painting or the other way round.

- The Suprematists (like founder Malevich, fh) who can also be included with the Constructivists are more closely related to Moholy Nagy... .The Suprematist artists are the poets of Constructivism. They do not stare blindly at rationalization like so many Russian Constructivists.

editor, Fons Heijnsbroek